BOOK REVIEWS

STUDIES IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO ORNITHOLOGY HONOURING RICHARD FFRENCH.

As a young birdwatcher, two books always grabbed my imagination—as much for their author’s names as for their exotic avifauna. James Bond’s—floyd_hayes/occasionalpaper_contents

journal articles, and notes, ffrench made tremendous contributions to our understanding of the distribution, natural history, and behavior of Caribbean birds. He also promoted natural history and conservation activities in Trinidad and Tobago, was a founding member of the Asa Wright Nature Centre, and was active in national and regional ornithological organizations. In a wonderful tribute to Richard ffrench, the editors of Studies in Trinidad and Tobago ornithology honouring Richard ffrench have collected 26 papers concerning ornithology in Trinidad and Tobago and the Eastern Caribbean. These papers are organized into five sections, including: I. Richard ffrench (3 papers); II. Taxonomy and Morphological Variation (3 papers); III. Faunistics and Population Ecology (6 papers); IV. Ecology, Behaviour and Conservation (8 papers); and V. Short Communications (6 papers).

In a tribute such as this, the breadth and depth of the papers is rich and fascinating. For example, in Part I, beyond the standard summaries of the accomplishments of ffrench, I enjoyed the editors’ selection of “Soldado Rock” as excerpted from A naturalist in Trinidad (Worth 1967). In this recounting of an expedition to a small island southwest of Trinidad, we find Richard ffrench accompanying a team of virus hunters as they collect ticks from seabirds. In a wonderfully entertaining story, so atypical of ornithological journals, we learn something about Brown Noddy (Anous stolidus) and Sooty Tern (Sterna fuscata) nesting behavior, the biology of ticks, the adventure of field biology, and most appropriately, something of the character and passion of Richard ffrench.

Part II contains some of the research highlights of the journal. In “Natal pterylosis of two Trinadian ovenbirds (Furnariidae),” Charles Collins and Tamara Araya describe the neossoptiles or the number and pattern of natal downs. In a data-rich paper, Floyd Hayes describes geographic variation and sexual dimorphism in the White-tailed Sabrewing (Campylopterus ensipesinis), and then presents three hypotheses to explain the function of the widened shafts of the outermost primaries which form the “sabres.” Although Hayes was unable to test these hypotheses, he does a good job of outlining a future research program to test sabre function. Finally, Robin Restall examines variation among Gray Seedeaters (Sporophila intermedia) and argues that S. i. insularis should be raised to a full species, Ring-necked Seedeater (S. insularis).

Part III contains mostly avifaunal studies from particular locales. These studies most often present species inventories, but some also use point counts or mist-netting to determine relative abundance of birds in describing avian communities. In addition to notes of pelagic seabirds wintering at sea, other papers examine bird abundance at Laventille Marsh prior to its apparent ‘destruction’; restored marsh sites at Caroni, Trinidad; Guayaguayare and the Victoria Mayaro Forest reserve of Trinidad; and the Bocas Islands of the northern Gulf of Paria between Trinidad and Venezuela. While of relevance to the conservation and management of these sites, these papers are of perhaps less interest to a wider, general audience. Of more interest, I think, is the unique approach taken by Doug McNair and coauthors in one of the few papers in the book not specific to Trinidad and Tobago. They combined data from Guana Island in the British Virgin Islands with similar data from Harrison Point at the northwest tip of Barbados to examine patterns of Nearctic-Neotropical landbird migration in the eastern Caribbean. Blackpoll Warblers (Dendroica striata) were the most common migrant at each site, but a perhaps surprising variety of scarce transients or vagrants were also recorded. Results are used to assess
what routes birds likely take during autumn migration.

The largest group of papers, Part IV, includes eight papers on ecology, behavior and conservation. These include studies of the foraging behavior of the Trinidad Piping-Guan (*Pipile pipile*), a very interesting report of the persistence of some White-bearded Manakin (*Manacus manacus*) leks for as long as 42 years, the biology of the Band-rumped Swift (*Chaetura spinicauda*) and the Black-throated Mango (*Anthraxospilos nigricollis*), and Stan Temple’s use of ffrench’s compilation of life history data and a unique multiple logistic regression model to predict the relative vulnerability of birds on Trinidad and Tobago to extinction. An interesting paper by Tim Manolis and Alex Cruz presents preliminary data on the brood parasitic Shiny Cowbird (*Molothrus bonariensis*) mating systems, suggesting that cowbirds may be promiscuous where host densities are clumped, but monogamous where hosts are more uniformly distributed. Finally, in my favorite article in this section, Mykela Heath and Mike Hansell examine weaving techniques used by Yellow Oriole (*Icterus nigrogularis*) and Crested Oropendola (*Psaracolius decumanus*) in nest building. The authors present a fascinating discussion of the types of weaving stitches, trajectories of strands of building materials, and stitching and building techniques, and compare these results to those of other nest weavers.

Finally, the tribute concludes with several short communications. While these are mostly sight records, their inclusion here is appropriate, as much of Richard ffrench’s contribution to ornithology and conservation in Trinidad and Tobago was based on just this sort of careful observation and record keeping.

The editors and the University of the West Indies are to be saluted for their contribution of this fine and handsomely produced monograph, and I expect Richard ffrench is pleased with this deserved tribute as well. The diversity of papers presented in the book provides an example of how much innovative and important ornithological work is undertaken in Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean in general. Now, if only the editors had thought to resolve that enduring question: what is the origin of that odd name, ffrench?—STEVEN C. LATT, PRBO Conservation Science, 7428 Redwood Blvd. Ste. 203, Novato, CA 94945, USA; e-mail: slatta@prbo.org

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**BOOK REVIEWS**


This welcome guide to the birds of the West Indies is a field version of Raffaele et al.’s (1998) popular *A guide to the birds of the West Indies*. Itself the successor to James Bond’s (1961) *Birds of the West Indies*, Raffaele et al.’s 1998 book is a comprehensive guide to 564 species, including wintering and passage migrants. All species were illustrated in Raffaele et al.’s 1998 book, and seven special plates featured the island endemics of Cuba, Hispaniola, Jamaica, and Puerto Rico. This earlier book also contained fairly comprehensive information on field identification, voice, nesting, and geographic range of each species. While widely hailed for its thorough treatment, it was also bemoaned for its large format, heavy weight, prohibitive cost, and especially for its notoriously bad binding which repeatedly failed to withstand even the lightest field use.

Now, Princeton University Press has released this heavily revised and redesigned book based on Raffaele et al.’s earlier effort. Much shorter in length, pocket-sized, and with a weather-resistant cover and solid binding, the book can truly be considered a field guide. Introductory material has been limited to brief accounts on how to use the guide, an explanation of terms used in the text, and a summary of conservation issues in the West Indies. A list of
threatened and endangered species is also provided, and while one may argue that much of this could be updated, and equivocate over which species are in which list, the point is clear that human populations and land use changes continue to have a tremendous, negative impact on the region’s birds. Species accounts are now placed facing the species’ illustration and are abbreviated. Included in the accounts are short descriptions of plumages, voice, status and range, and habitat. Of highest importance for identification, the plumage descriptions focus on key field marks, and while they may be sufficient for the identification of most species by experienced birdwatchers, they are probably insufficiently detailed for beginners, or to separate hard-to-identify species that may be easily confused; seldom is there any specific information on similar species. The number and quality of range maps has also been reduced. While these, too, are placed facing the plates, all but the largest islands of the Greater Antilles have been relegated to the tiniest dot of color. In addition, the useful list of common local names of each species that was found in the earlier edition has been omitted. Nevertheless, these are minor problems, and are largely necessary compromises that one must make in distilling information on 564 species of birds into a single, pocket-sized field guide.

The plates in the Birds of the West Indies by principal illustrators Tracy Pederson and Kristin Williams, and supporting artists Cynthie Fisher, Don Radovich, and Bart Rulon, vary in quality but are largely very well done. The special plates featuring island endemics have unfortunately been omitted to save pages, and others, such as the vireos, have been entirely repainted. We find particularly well-done many of the waterbirds, parrots and parakeets, Caprimulgids (including the nice black-and-white drawings of tail patterns), hummingbirds, and woodpeckers. The warbler plates we find particularly difficult to use, especially those of non-breeding plumages which are incomplete and would be of most value in the region. Some plates have been reorganized from the earlier guide. With computer technologies, plates can now be disassembled and reassembled, allowing for updating, deletions, and replacements of images. This allows much flexibility in book design, but it also contributes to a certain inconsistency among plates, which can be compounded with the multiple artists involved in the project. So for example, some plates mix images by different artists with different styles. Another occasional problem is one of distributing images among the plates. Because publishers are no longer constrained by the composition of the original work by the artist, some plates, such as the shorebirds in this guide, can be very crowded with figures, and others, such as the first plate of thrushes, can appear quite empty. Another minor detail that could actually be corrected with these technologies is that we might prefer that the guide have placed all birds on one plate facing the same direction. This allows for an easier comparison among similar species. More important in our minds is a preference that all views of any one species be on the same plate. For example, images of birds in flight are often on plates several pages away from images of the same species perched. Similarly, views of birds in breeding and non-breeding plumages are not often together, making comparisons of plumages more difficult.

Overall, we think this revised and redesigned version of the Raffaele et al. guide is a very well done, field-worthy book that will be carried by almost all Caribbean residents and visitors interested in bird identification. We particularly like its handy size and durability, the ease in which a species can be located in the book, and its relative affordability. Nevertheless, we still carry the more complete A guide to the birds of the West Indies in our vehicles as a reference. Whereas this guide is especially useful for those birdwatchers traveling among several islands, we think that there is still a need for island-specific field guides that can provide more in-depth presentations of field identification of all birds, especially very similar or easily confused species, as well as the natural history, ecology, and conservation of island birds.—Steven C. Slatta, PRBO Conservation Science, 7428 Redwood Blvd. Ste. 203, Novato, CA 94945, USA; e-mail: slatta@prbo.org; and Kate Wallace, Apdo. 3284, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, e-mail: cua809@yahoo.com

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Through reading books we hear their voices and understand their thoughts and feelings. Reading stirs my imagination, creates colourful pictures of the described characters and events in my mind, transfers me to other countries, continents or even to other worlds, introduces me to amazing people who live exciting lives, makes me laugh and cry. I can travel to wild jungles and deserts, to hot Africa and cold Arctic or wherever I like staying at home.